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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 VILNIUS 000395

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SUBJECT: ANTI-GAY RALLY IN VILNIUS DRAWS EU'S ATTENTION

Classified By: Political/Economic Section Chief Rebecca Dunham for reas
on 1.4 (d)

¶1. (U) Summary: An anti-homosexual rally in downtown Vilnius on May 25, originally planned to coincide with a pro-diversity rally, drew a small, non-violent crowd. The City of Vilnius' decision to prevent the European Commission-sponsored pro-diversity and gay pride rally from taking place has drawn fire from the EU and western institutions, including rumored threats of withdrawing a planned Gender Equality Institute from Vilnius. End summary.

Anti-gay Protest Eclipses Anti-discrimination Event

¶2. (U) A group calling itself "For Morals and Nation" organized an unauthorized anti-homosexual rally in the public square in front of the government offices in downtown Vilnius on Friday May 25. Information about the demonstration was circulated via the internet and flyers with a graphic anti-gay logo (also used by anti-gay protestors in Riga) announcing plans for the demonstration were posted around the city. Approximately ten participants, mostly teenagers and young adults, wore white t-shirts bearing the same anti-gay logo and passed out flyers labeled "Resist Homosexual Propaganda." Towards the end of the rally the organizers raised a large Lithuanian flag and chanted "Lithuania." The stated goal of the group, which is an informal affiliation of citizens "fighting to preserve the institute of family," was to protest pro-homosexual "propaganda" and public declaration of homosexuality, which they claim will corrupt children. One participant was overheard explaining that he was exercising his right to free speech and trying to protect children by passing out the flyers. Embassy observers estimated that less than fifty people showed up deliberately for the rally; however, the normal lunch time crowd made it difficult to identify participants from passersby. One local television station covered the event. A member of the For Morals and Nation Group and President of the Lithuanian Nationalist Union, Marius Kundrotas, told local press that the group had "already succeeded" in keeping homosexuals from holding a public demonstration. The event passed without incident.

¶3. (U) The anti-gay demonstration was originally planned as a counter-rally to coincide with a European Commission-sponsored event titled "For Diversity, Against Discrimination". The centerpiece of the EC event would have been a pro-diversity trailer designed to spread information about tolerance and equal opportunities around Europe. The Lithuanian Gay League had planned to participate and hold up a thirty-meter-long rainbow flag in the square. Vilnius Mayor Juozas Imbrasas publicly expressed opposition to the pro-diversity event. Vilnius city officials subsequently refused to issue a permit to the EC pro-diversity and gay-pride demonstration, claiming that the anti-homosexual rally could lead to outbreaks of violence. The Lithuanian

Gay League NGO stated they would respect the decision of the City and held two smaller, indoor gay-pride events on May 24 and 25 instead. NGO Members told Embassy officials that they were considering legal action against the city, but still had approximately 30 days to decide whether or not to bring the issue to court.

EU Distressed, Weighing Response

¶4. (U) After the City of Vilnius refused to issue a permit for the pro-diversity event, the European Commission released a statement condemning the decision. The EC highlighted that this was the first time in the four years that the EC pro-diversity trailer has been on tour that an event has been canceled by local authorities. Other European institutions quickly echoed the condemnation; Council of Europe Human Rights Commissioner Thomas Hammarberg urged Vilnius to reconsider its decision and foster "the freedom of meetings for all citizens" as required under the European Convention on Human Rights. The Lithuanian Equal Opportunities Ombudsman's Office has initiated an investigation into whether the Vilnius Municipality had any legal grounds for prohibiting the pro-diversity event.

¶5. (U) Lithuania was granted the right to host the European Gender Equality Institute by the European Parliament in 2006. This development delighted Lithuanian elites still excited about Lithuania's accession to the EU in 2004. The Institute is supposed to be established later this year, and would be the first EU institute in Lithuania. Following the decision not to allow the pro-diversity event, there was media speculation that Lithuania might lose this privilege, including a comment by Giedre Purvaneckiene, an advisor to the Prime Minister, who said that the European Commission is

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reconsidering the decision to establish the Institute in Vilnius.

Comment

¶6. (C) The Vilniu municipality's position on the pro-diversity and gay pride events highlights the gulf between EU expectations of tolerance and those observed in Lithuania. The relatively homogenous Lithuanian society suffers from some of the xenophobia and prejudices that sometimes accompany homogenous cultures. These attitudes present a stumbling block to this country's ability to quickly adopt the EU standards of gender and racial tolerance and equality. The Lithuanian desire to be treated as equals in the EU rather than as second-class citizens will push an enlightened minority to try to enforce EU standards of tolerance, and the fear of losing the privilege of hosting the Gender Equality Institute will prod a few others, but there remains much work to be done before the tolerance accorded to gays in Western Europe becomes the norm here.

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